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Written statement* submitted by the Global Network for Rights and Development (GNRD), a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[15 February 2016]

* This written statement is issued, unedited, in the language(s) received from the submitting non-governmental organization(s).

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Written statement on children and armed conflict

The Global Network for Rights and Development welcomes the panel on children and armed conflict as a valuable opportunity to address the multiple threats and challenges affecting children in armed conflict. The commitment of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights and that of the Human Rights Council are key to protect children from humanitarian disasters, as it is war. From these lines, GNRD highly appreciates Ms. Leila Zerrougui, UN Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict, all her efforts to protect children from violence. We are pleased to see the outcome of her work while we encourage her to continue working with such determination.

Recent research conducted by some of the most prestigious universities of the world has showed the importance of secure environments and supportive relationships for children's healthy development[1]. Children who have solid relationship with their parents are more capable of controlling their own emotions, learn through the experience and cope with difficulties when they arise. In this sense, when children feel safe and grow in a conflict free environment, they are enabled to play without worries, to explore and try new things. By helping children feel safe, we prepare them to be the future of humanity with all the responsibility this implies.

In this context, we would like to draw the attention of the Human Rights Council to the more than 5 million children who are living in dire situation in Syria. Since the beginning of the conflict, Syrian children have been the subject of threats and violence. As of June 2015, the United Nations reported that 10,000 children have been killed in the Syrian civil war, and verified 2,107 grave violations by all parties to the conflict in major urban and rural areas[2]. One of the most flagrant abuses included the recruitment and use of children in combat as soldiers or human shields. This has become one of the most common and abusive practices of Daesh, which as a method of training and indoctrination, is reported to have used rape, torture and corporal punishment with children.

Under these circumstances, we believe it is important to state that the recrudescence of the war is the main responsible for the humanitarian crisis that is affecting Syria. After five years of conflict, the estimate number of Syrian children in need of assistance increased to 7.5 million, plus over 2 million who were forced to sought refuge in neighboring countries, struggling to meet basic needs. Their road to freedom is long and harsh, and sometimes, children have no option but to start the journey on their own after having lost relatives and friends. According to UNICEF, 25,000 unaccompanied children arrived in Europe in 2014, while 12,000 tried to reach Europe without any of their parents until September 2015[3]. Since the war started, more than 10,000 unaccompanied refugee children have disappeared in Europe[4], the EU police agency Europol said in late January. Policemen are concerned they have been victims of sex trafficking and slave trade.

In terms of preparation, the United Nations Children's Fund revealed that war reversed 10 years of progress in education in Syria, and the total number of children who are not attending school recently reached the amount of 3 million. Thus, at least 25% of the schools in Syria have been seriously damaged or totally destroyed, occupied by internally displaced families or used for military purposes, according to recent reports, which also reveal that repairing Syria's devastated education sector would need approximately 3 billion Euro. School enrolment rates in the country also decreased to an average of 50%, down from previous levels in which basic education enrolment ratio was close to 100%. In fact, areas such as Aleppo, which has been shattered by the war, the enrolment level decreased to a 6% with more than one million children out of school[5].

However, despite all the chaos there is still hope in addressing the presumably high illiteracy rates amongst Syrian children. From the standpoint of the Global Network for Rights and Development, the measure taken by the governments of Lebanon, Egypt, Tukey and Jordan, in which they help to provide Syrian child refugees with formal education, could be set as an example of solidarity and support to a long-suffering people. Late in January, for example,

[1] http://jfs.ohio.gov/octf/Supporting-Healthy-Relationships-Between-Young-Children-and-.pdf
[2] https://childrenandarmedconflict.un.org/countries/syria/
[3] http://www.unicef.org/publicpartnerships/files/Refugee_and_migrant_children_in_Europe_-_Sept_2015.pdf
[4] http://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jan/30/fears-for-missing-child-refugees
[5] http://static.guim.co.uk/ni/1427711553264/Save-the-Children-Cost-of-W.pdf

the Lebanese government announced they took 207,000 Syrian refugee children off the streets and gave them places in their country's public schools thanks to a double-shift school system[6]. Whilst local Lebanese children would continue to be educated in the morning, the same classrooms where they study will be available to refugee children in the afternoon. From these lines, GNRD would also like to refer to the Convention on the Rights of the Child of 1989, which establishes global standards to ensure the protection, survival, and development of all children, without discrimination. Despite the Convention details that States Parties must ensure that all children benefit from special protection measures and assistance, including access to education and health care.

As a response to the humanitarian crisis which is affecting not only Syria but the rest of the world, the Global Network for Rights and Development started a project in Europe almost one year ago, which consisted of doing research and helping the people who fled war zones in Syria, distributing relief items amongst them, and documenting all the humanitarian aid donated by individuals and other humanitarian support groups. Following this project, GNRD is currently building up a pan-European relief effort for Syia's displaced persons and Syrian refugees abroad in partnership with the Union of Syrians Abroad voluntary organisation.

As the conflict continues unabated towards its sixth year, the needs of Syrian citizens seeking refugee in Europe and elsewhere have multiplied lately, including the ones of children. GNRD is concerned that they might be the forgotten victims of the conflict. We believe it would not be fair for them to be only in the spotlight after drowning in the coasts of Europe trying to escape from the horrors of war. What Syrian children need is a safe environment to grow and a chance to play and go to school, and it is the State's and the international community's duty to cover their basic needs, as it is conveyed in the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Therefore, and accordingly, we at the Global Network for rights and development calls upon the state parties to:

- Make bigger efforts in the protection of Syrian children while they are in their territory.
- Guarantee all the rights enshrined in the Convention on the Rights of the Child of 1989, regardless the circumstances.
- Contribute to family reunification in the event of identifying unaccompanied children established within their territory.
- Design and implement strategies with the aim to integrate children and their families in the society.
- Ensure that the principle of non-refoulement is respected.
- Strengthen their joint responses to the global refugee crisis.

[6] http://www.huffingtonpost.com/sarah-brown/a-business-plan-for-the-s_1_b_9039992.html